Review
Identifying Celts

Vincent Megaw*

VENCESLAS KRUTA. *Celtic art*. 240 pages, 255 colour illustrations. Translated by Keith & Angela Bradford. 2015. London & New York: Phaidon. 978-0-7148-4597-5 hardback £39.95.

JULIA FARLEY & FRASER HUNTER (ed.). *Celts: art and identity*. 304 pages, 267 colour illustrations. 2015. London: British Museum. 978-0-7141-2835-1 hardback £40.

IAN LEINS. *Celts: art and identity*. 56 pages, 72 colour illustrations. 2015. London: British Museum. 978-0-7141-2837-5 paperback £5.



The Council of Europe declared 1992 to be the 'Year of the Ancient Celts', yet books dealing with the Celts—Celts in the past, Celts today, Celts who never existed—continue to appear unabated. The titles reviewed here are characteristic of three of the main categories of such fare: exhibition catalogues, general introductions and just nice books to look at.

Starting with the last category, few writers dealing with the art of the European Iron Age can have been more prolific in the production of both academic monographs and examples of *haute vulgarisation* as Venceslas Kruta. The Franco-Czech pupil of Paul-Marie Duval, whom he succeeded as Directeur d'études de protohistoire de l'Europe at the École pratique des hautes études in Paris, later becoming Directeur du Centre d'études celtiques, is today Professeur émérite at the Sorbonne. For many years, Kruta has worked with some of the master photographers of the surviving *chefs d'oeuvres* of the past, starting with the Austrian Erich Lessing and *Les Celtes* (1978), and then collaborating with fellow Czech Werner Forman on *The Celts of the West* (1985). More recently, adding a third photographer with the Italian Dario Bertuzzi, Kruta produced what one might have thought to be his last large-format, tuppence-coloured survey, *Celts: history and civilization* (2004). But it is not so.

"Of the making of many coffee-table books, there appears no end"; so wrote Stuart Piggott (1980) in a not very kind review of Barry Cunliffe's *The Celtic world*. How then does the latest addition to the pile stack up? Basically, seven brief introductory texts, divided by rather too much bilious green paper, take one from the beginnings of Celtic 'art'—and some sober considerations of its nature and contemporary reactions to it—to the seemingly obligatory epilogue on the Christian art of Ireland. The bulk of the book comprises a chronologically divided collection of objects, with line drawings occasionally augmenting a largely first-class series of colour photographs and useful descriptive texts—in other words, what might be seen as a catalogue of Celtic art in the manner of André Malraux's (1947) *Le musée imaginaire*.

The two other review books considered here both relate to the Celts exhibition organised by the British Museum and National Museums Scotland (see exhibition review by Fernández-Götz, this issue 237–44). It is therefore timely to recall that earlier exhibitions have also been accompanied by substantial volumes. One may commence with *Die Kelten in Mitteleuropa*, edited by Ludwig Pauli (1980) and which accompanied the exhibition held in the Austrian salt-mining town of Hallein, and *Das Rätsel der Kelten vom Glauberg* edited by Holger Baitinger and Bernhard Pinsker (2002), which was associated with the Frankfurt show. More recently, the multilingual *Kunst der Kelten: 700 vor bis 700 nach Chr.—art of the Celts: 700 BC to AD 700* edited by Felix Müller (2009) serves as a justly praiseworthy crowning of his long service at the Historisches Museum Bern. Finally, building on the

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Bern exhibition, we have had the twin Stuttgart shows with the door-stopping *Die Welt der Kelten*, edited by Ralph Röber (2012). Reviews of these exhibitions and catalogues have previously found their place in the pages of *Antiquity* (Megaw 1981, 2010, 2013).

While Kruta's volume might be thought of as a book disguised as a catalogue, *Celts: art and identity*—edited by the respective curators of the exhibition, Julia Farley for the British Museum and Fraser Hunter for National Museums Scotland—is in fact a catalogue disguised as a book. Clearly, despite a note to the effect that this publication accompanies the exhibitions, the publishers have been at pains to establish it as a stand-alone product with a shelf-life long after that of the London and Edinburgh versions of the project. Thus, catalogue entries as such are replaced by the rather mean 'List of exhibited objects' (pp. 280–83) and 'Illustration acknowledgements' (pp. 298–99), and also by the more generous picture captions. The running text is a cooperative affair. After a joint opening chapter, 'In search of the Celts', which concludes with a view of the plurality of Celtic arts—well, you cannot please everyone all of the time—Jody Joy, Julia Farley's predecessor as Curator of the European Iron Age Collections at the British Museum, takes over and tackles the subject of 'Approaching Celtic art'. Such a topic surely should have included more than a passing reference to Paul Jacobthal and the other pioneers of the study of early Celtic art. Joy manages his opening task with reference to only three continental pieces but includes the seemingly statutory reference to Alfred Gell and his theory of 'the technology of enchantment'. Then follows a two-hander by Joy and Hunter, 'A connected Europe, *c.* 500–150 BC'; the two-page summary by Joy of Jacobsthal's stylistic divisions (pp. 56–58) is frankly unacknowledged and inadequate—for those who look in vain for the source of the sword drawing, it is from grave 2 Bodroghalom-Medvetanya, Borsoeld-Abaúj-Zemplén m. and is obliquely referenced in passing on p. 76.

And here, if only to pass it by, let me note a weakness in what is in many ways a fine addition to the Celticist's library—none of the contributors is a specialist on the Continental Iron Age. This may, for example, account for the lack of any discussion of the various regional early La Tène metal-working centres, much of the later stamped and painted pottery and the somewhat second-hand, if not uneasy, tone to the treatment of what should be the core of this volume: the various sub-style scabbard, rather than 'sword' styles, as the authors correctly point out. With regard to this last point, spanning the late fourth to second centuries BC, these products of master metalsmiths concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe are noticeable by their virtual absence (presumably due to the unavailability of loans), and are restricted to a single paragraph and a detail on the reverse of the scabbard from a burial at Cernon-sur-Coole (Marne) (fig. 60), a piece with a close analogy in Slovakia. That country, as well as Switzerland, Hungary and former Yugoslavia, is sadly totally unrepresented, and, by extension, the opportunity to discuss the relationship between Continental and Insular pre-Roman art is also virtually missed. Yet, in 'A changing world, *c.* 150 BC–AD 50', Ian Leins and Julia Farley, respectively a numismatist and a specialist in precious metals in the Iron Age, offer a useful bridge between the Continent and the British Isles—even though Ireland is somewhat relegated to the background.

More satisfactory, I find, are the remaining two-thirds of *Celts: art and identity*, which commences with three chapters dealing with the Roman and post-Roman periods—'The impact of Rome, *c.* AD 50–250', 'Out of a Roman world, *c.* AD 250–650' and 'At the western edge of the Christian world, *c.* AD 600–900'—where Hunter and his Edinburgh colleague, Martin Goldberg, offer an elegant insight into the complex development of the artistic traditions of the period. They are followed by Heather Pulliam, of the Edinburgh College of Art and a specialist on early medieval art in Britain and Ireland, on 'Tracing the Celts? Survival and transformation, *c.* AD 800–1600', and by Frances Fowle, another teacher at the Edinburgh College of Art as well as holding a Curatorship at the Scottish National Gallery, who has fun with 'The Celtic revival in Britain & Ireland: reconstructing the past, *c.* AD 1600–1920'. Apparently the weighting of 'Celts: art and identity', the exhibition as well as the books, towards the historical and recent periods has been a *sine qua non* for Glasgow-born Neil MacGregor, whose last major project this was as Director of the British Museum.

There are certain objects, 'icons' in the contemporary misuse of the word, which one expects to see in every survey of Celtic art. I am therefore surprised that the scant presentation of Iron Age sculpture seems to have missed the chance to include the famous ragstone head found in 1943 just outside the square

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enclosure of Mšecké Žehrovice, okr. Rakovník, which is probably the best-known artefact in the Czech Republic and must rank amongst the most exposed antiquities of later prehistoric Europe. While the original has rarely left its place in the collections of the National Museum in Prague, there are, apart from photographs, some excellent copies, one of which is just behind me as I write. Another seeming must does appear in the final chapter of Farley and Hunter's book entitled 'Celtic arts in the long term'. Written by Hunter, Goldberg, Farley and Leins, it is in many ways the most satisfactory—and paradoxical. It commences with a 10-page picture-essay devoted to the Gundestrup cauldron, which is made of silver but with evidence of gilding and the use of glass inlay (for a detailed technical examination of the cauldron, see Nielsen *et al.* 2005). Found in pieces in the Raevmose peat-bog at Gundestrup in Jutland, as the eloquent text points out, this object is not a Celtic piece, or at least not just Celtic. For me, one argument remains solid—that the cauldron is basically Thracian in origin but made for a community of eastern Celts. More debatable is the statement that the earliest Celtic art originated in the fifth century BC; certainly, Czech colleagues, while agreeing that there were not one but several centres, would look for a still earlier beginning.

Taking a middle road in the potholed path that, in recent decades, has seen a denial of the ancient Celts and the virtual isolation of Britain and Ireland from the Continent, the various authors present a view of Celtic arts—plural—telling different stories but accepting both connections and differences. As they conclude, 'Celts' are complicated.

Remembering Joe E. Brown's immortal response, 'Well, nobody's perfect', so it is with *Celts: art and identity*. There are some relatively trivial issues; for example, the citation of local government divisions or museums is not always up to date. There is the occasional stumble with ascriptions, most notably in what is claimed to be part of a possible linchpin of Jacobsthal's 'Plastic' style (fig. 57); despite contrary views, there is no definitive evidence of a Cambridgeshire findspot. On the other hand, the colour photography is first class (the exceptions being figs 51–52, 89 and 92) and fit to compare with anything in Kruta's latest offering. Lack of a strict chronological ordering does make things a touch difficult for the newcomer to the subject—which I guess typifies the vast majority of readers—but there is a more than adequate bibliography in which only Sievers *et al.* (2012) might be regarded as a major omission. There is also a workable index, something often lacking in such volumes.

And so to the slimmest, but by no means trivial, title in our Celtic trinity—Ian Leins's compression of some 3000 years (covered in the larger catalogue) into a richly illustrated picture-essay. He has done a pretty good job in producing what I guess is something aimed squarely at general visitors and Celtic Studies class 001. So it would seem that, with no real rival English publication in print and without considering some of the alternative Continental candidates for best buys noted above, we would appear to have all bases covered in these three volumes. There can be no doubt that Julia Farley, Fraser Hunter and their colleagues have made a valiant attempt at a daunting task, and largely succeeded. Certainly after producing this latest treasure trove, we can expect no major follow-up in the near future. Or can we . . . ?

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